

Creative Action Centres for Regional Sustainable Development

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September 2003**

What I am about to suggest to you today is not a policy paper but the basis of my masters thesis whereby I suggest strategies for regional sustainable development based on culture and creativity. I have grouped these strategies under the heading of Creative Action Centres and I will leave it up to you to decide how you interpret these Centres – are they a concept for creative action criteria; are they the seed of an idea for future community facilities or research centres; or are they a testing laboratory for existing and new industries, policies or projects.

So why do I consider society's culture, artists and creators to be an essential ingredient for achieving sustainable development?

The arts and culture create theatre and objects that convey the stories of our past, evaluate the present or envisage our future. They use a range of themes and artistic self-expression to communicate with us. It doesn't matter how a piece of art has emerged, what counts is how we interpret the work as individuals, or whether we can participate in a meaningful way.

The arts and culture are a sub sector of the more commercial creative industries which I include since they enhance the role of the arts and culture in regional sustainable development. This is because they employ a wide network of resources and knowledge; they represent a new-high growth economic sector; and they provide entry to global markets. The creative industries also contribute to the changing role and identity of the artist by diminishing reliance on funding and sponsorship; using technology to make production easier; meeting the varied demands of discerning consumers and enabling increased public participation in creativity - hence demystifying the artsⁱ.

Culture is a concept not an industry – It's the social production and transmission of identities, meanings, values, attitudes and understandings.

Culture is also a collective way of life for people who come together according to purpose, identity or a sense of place. As humans in order to make sense of our lives and others in this world we adopt a value system - or a culture. A society's culture ultimately decides whether individuals, governments and business deserve approval for their actions.

Therefore when I talk about adopting a cultural policy of Creative Action Centres I am talking about a cultural and creative climate where everyone has an equal role to play whether they are artists or scientists, builders or brokers, students or retired.

There is a growing body of evidence that the pillar of sustainability is culture. This is because in the long-term if sustainable development works, then what will survive are the natural and material environment, and the cultural climate that supports it. Natural environments, buildings and industries will only survive if they are valued for cultural reasons or can be used for whatever new economic processes are seen to be culturally important. On this basis sustainable development will require changes to individual and social behavior, which is a cultural process of

changing values. Therefore it will be necessary to develop processes where culture is a focus of how the fruits of economic development are directed. At the same time there is a need to explore how the arts and creativity can contribute to the development of these new processes and the testing of policies and practice.

Having been marginalized for many years in a country dominated by coastal living, regional Australia is now a crucial domain of government policy. In 1999 the federal government held a *Regional Australia Summit* to find solutions to a growing sense of alienation in regional Australia and to bridge the increasing gulf between metropolitan areas and the bush. One of the clearest messages to emerge from the summit was the perceived lack of coordination and collaboration across governments. The summit also identified key areas for change as can be seen in this table.

Even summarized as a task list of five areas for government action one cannot but think how they will be achieved. So far very little action has taken place and it is not surprising under the current cultural climate. For a start how many artists and creators in the community were represented among those consulted as a part of the summit. Even if government does try to implement these policies they won't get commitment unless they understand a community's culture. And if they fail - it will only mean that they should have tested these policies in the first place. And if they had tested them perhaps they would have identified the cultural drivers that create a 'can do' community.

What we need is a regional renaissance.

This conference has brought us together to discuss REGIONAL sustainable development but what does regional mean in this country or any other. Australia's regions are not commonly accepted boundaries as defined geographically by its six States, two Territories and the triple tiers of government.

Our regional communities have long debated whether these geographic or jurisdictional boundaries make sense on the basis of socio-economic interdependence or other connections that distinguish neighboring areas. There exists a well-known cultural divide in Australia where the east coast regards cities such as Darwin and Perth as remote destinations inhabited by hicks who wear crocodile skins and 'go troppo' in the wet season. In fact Darwin and Perth as cosmopolitan cities lead by example and have been serving up cappuccino's for as long as Sydney or Melbourne has.

This map of Remoteness Structure illustrates a spatial concept of five classification groups which broadly describe regional Australia. Each group shares common characteristics in terms of physical distance from services, and opportunities for social interaction. They are measured according to road distance from any point to the nearest Urban Centre. These classes cut across State and local government boundaries and provide an understanding of the patterns of socio-economic experience across Australia's regions. As you can see the only one of our current capital cities that is included in the major cities group – is Darwin. Even more interesting to note is that the Northern Territory's previous liberal Chief Minister Shane Stone regarded his government as operating within the southeast Asian region rather than Australia. I might add for the benefit of any Victorians in the room that it was Shane Stone not Jeff Kennett who first took on the dual portfolio of arts minister at the same time as being chief minister.

Regionalism alone is a complex issue to tackle but we also live in a time of the New Mobility, where:

- the only constant is change - which needs perpetual innovation
- the only boundary is global - creating a human need for the renewal of identity and national image
- the new growth economy is knowledge - demanding new skill clusters and creative communities
- the only problem is your next project and you'd better have a diversified network to help you solve it
- value driven demand will require customer satisfaction and only those who can break the cultural codes of customers and suppliers will profit.

So what do we do:

Sustainable development in regional Australia involves a complex web of three levels of government and faces tangible and intangible issues that require rigorous research and analysis in order to develop innovative solutions. Historically the distribution of powers and resources between regions and cities has traditionally been one-way. But today regional problems are recognised and shared by cities and communities.

Now is the time for these regions to be reinvented to work in partnership with key city centers or other regions. This will require a change in the mind-sets and jurisdictions of local governments and regional development commissions who operate at the coalface of existing geographic and legislative policies.

Brave new regions will involve recognition of cultural shifts and drivers; engineering resolutions for enmities between regional towns; and, the subsequent connection with major city centres. Economic growth will not only lie in the ability of a region to attract creative entrepreneurs, but also to translate this creative advantage into new ideas, high-tech business and regional growth. Regions need to make themselves attractive by appealing to young people, providing a choice of employment opportunities, a 'happening' scene, and allowing for ethnic and cultural diversity. As a result these brave new regions will become the testing grounds for new policies, projects and industries.

I stated earlier that we need to embrace a regional renaissance because the evidence is clear that we are entering a time when we have to be imaginative to survive.

International academic and business theorists are just coming to terms with an impending creative age. This age of creativity will occur in response to the emergence of a knowledge-based economy and an impending era of constant innovation brought on by the evolution of technology. We are becoming a society based on knowledge creation whereby the means of production is the creation and engineering of ideas, concepts and know-how stemming from many and varied forms of production, managed through networking, measured by value, and creating an advantage from a power base that is culturalⁱⁱ.

Studies of regional economic development across the US, have identified a new social class whose core includes not only artists, writers, designers and musicians but also scientists, engineers, educators and architects. This creative class includes anyone whose core function is to create new ideas, or solve problems. It includes professionals who work (often without support staff) in a wide range of knowledge intensive industries, and who engage in problem-solving by drawing on complex bodies of information to solve specific questions. This new creative class has a more ecological approach to development, one that stresses networks,

image, diversity, community and clusters of independent groups that can mix and match skill sets to suit creative outcomes.

When discussing the utility of creativity there exists a need for new types of cluster development, since achieving and sustaining advantage in any industry depends in part on how effectively the interactions work. Traditional industry clusters were founded on the notion of firms and supply chains competing aggressively with each other on quantity and cost in order to drive forward innovation, market share and company growth. By comparison – the drivers behind the creative industries is not to build up the company but the projects and the particular group of people who are working on it. When the project is complete the group may well dissolve but will reform in a new or different way for the next new projectⁱⁱⁱ.

In the process of sustainable development, there is one certainty; sustainability means we must pursue the idea of establishing a regional 'sense of place'. The idea of cultural identity providing the basis for community is now clear as is our increasing awareness of the socio-cultural and ecological interactions that occur in each region. Building the capacity of regional communities to create positive change is about place and identity^{iv}.

Byzantium is under the hills hoist^v.

The small scale of existing action together with the potential for widespread inclusion indicates the need for new government policies and strategies to drive future interest and growth in creative cultural action for sustainable development.

If we are agreed that sustainable development in any region should contribute to the long-term improvement of community life, then we accept that this will involve community engagement to overcome inequities; gain acceptance of business and government activity; as well as build on the positive elements of a region's cultural attributes such as lifestyle, outdoor activities or aboriginal and cultural heritage.

To assist this process I am suggesting a broad cultural policy (as opposed to arts policy) and a new cultural climate that advocates formal and informal multidisciplinary 'Creative Action Centres'. These centres of creative action would recognise the value of the arts and creativity within people from all walks of life, and allow them to be engaged in all sorts of activities either professionally or recreationally. They will be about creative action in any form which acknowledges a willingness of all parties involved toward the development, implementation and assessment of new processes or industries.

In developing this theory it is not a matter of which creative types are to be concentrated on - it is a matter of enabling numerous directions for the exchange of ideas. Participants in creative action will not only devise strategies for market development and community acceptance – they will also represent the market and the community due to the diversity of actors. People who will be involved with creative action will enjoy their job or role as a volunteer because their ideas will be heard, their experience will be valued, and they will work with peers whom they respect and equally value.

Rather than debate who is responsible for jurisdictions, programs and services or who implements the 'quality of life' aims embodied in a newly developed city plan – a creative action approach will mean that government officers and staff will have already listened to stakeholders and found solutions to fit new paradigms. Rather than picking winners or spotting where the economic growth sectors will be based, creative actions can afford to take risks because they

adopt a more balanced approach by engaging many sectors to work on a variety of projects across newly defined regions.

Creative initiatives should be part of a conscious, consistent attempt to build an environment that makes creative action and innovations more likely, and sets new standards to seek a way forward. If there is a focus on activities such as R&D, electronic techniques and services, the different skill set and personnel required, will, over time attract new kinds of people with different priorities. These people will demand a multi-layered experience and will recognise and work with local cultures and can intermesh nature and the built infrastructure seamlessly.

Finally, if these new suggested approaches are to involve the arts and creative sectors they too will have a responsibility to get to grips with the new environment to ensure they have the capacity to deliver. Equally certain government considerations will be needed to encourage industry development within the arts and cultural sector or the success of creative cultural action will be limited by funding criteria. However, as has already been stated, of all the industry sectors we know, the arts and creative industries have the tenacity and ingenuity to manage this newfound responsibility. This is because they are simultaneously arts, science, government and business; based on the oldest and newest, low-tech and high-tech activities; and at the same time as their products reach global heights they also have a highly personal value.

ⁱ See Resources, Documents and Papers section on Creative Clusters website at <http://www.creativeclusters.co.uk> [2003, June 12]

ⁱⁱ See Murakami, T. 2000. *Encouraging the Emergent Evolution of New Industries*. Nomura Research Institute Paper No. 1, April 2000. [Online] Available at: <http://www.nri.co.jp/english/opinion/papers/2000/pdf/np200001.pdf> [2003, August 14]

ⁱⁱⁱ See Landry, C. 2002. *Future Perth Working Paper No. 12 Can Perth be More Creative?* in the publications section of Western Australian Planning Commission website at <http://www.planning.wa.gov.au> [2003, August 14]

^{iv} See *Developing a Strategy for Regional Sustainability in the State of Western Australia* in the Discussion Paper section of the Western Australian State Sustainability website at <http://www.sustainability.dpc.wa.gov.au/docs/Strategy.htm> [March 2002]

^v Kelso, K. WA arts and cultural discussion group. March 2002.